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Environmental security and the case against rethinking criminology as “security-ology”

Rita Floyd

Abstract

In this paper I argue against Clifford Shearing’s suggestion that in the age of the Anthropocene the discipline of criminology should be rethought as “security-ology”, where concerns of security as a state of being and practices of security (i.e. securitization) and not crime and criminalization dominate the agenda. My objection consists of three key points. First, contra Shearing, I argue that it is analytically weak to describe all political practices concerned with achieving greater justice and/or security as a state of being as security practices. At a minimum, I suggest, relevant actors must conceive of their own actions as security practices, for the latter to count as such. Second, by drawing on literature from Environmental Security Studies I show that elevating environmental issues to security problems does not necessarily produce a more secure environment for people. Instead the best successes-in terms of accomplishing environmental security as a state of being-have been achieved through collaborate efforts between states and key stake-holders. I suggest that Shearing’s work on New Environmental Governance can be understood in these terms as it can help to produce greater actual security. Third, the age of the Anthropocene gives renewed relevance to crime and criminalization. Not only does it necessitate the rethinking of the meaning of crime, but also criminalization can be used to achieve compliance with environmental legislation.

I read Professor Shearing’s interesting lecture as an attempt to defend the idea that the discipline of criminology ought to do its bit to respond to the pressing problems posed by the age of the Anthropocene. The latter term designates that we have moved from the Holocene into a new geological epoch, characterized by the fact that human activity is now shaping and irreversibly transforming the ‘natural’ environment on a global scale. Some of these activities have had (on the surface at least) positive consequences for human life, notably on the productivity of agriculture, including improved crop yields. There have however been a range of unwelcome side-effects most prominently biodiversity loss and global climatic change.

Together these constitute a great source of insecurity for people, states and non-human species everywhere. Thus we know - from successive authoritative Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's assessment reports- that global warming is likely to lead to an increase in vector borne diseases, food scarcity, absence of rainfall (droughts), unstable weather patterns, sea- level rise and crop failure. And some scholars have linked these to climate-induced violent conflict, migration and state failure (see, for example, Busby, 2008; Paskal, 2010).

Shearing's concern is driven by a number of factors: a love for the natural environment; the realization of close interdependence between ecological systems and human well-being (the key idea behind the notion of ecosystem services); dismay in the face of the destructiveness of human actions, and the not negligible fact that he has - in the form of the possible children of his grandchildren - a personal stake in the fate of future people. I share all of these, though being of a later vintage than the Professor, my dearest and nearest future people are the possible offspring of my two very young children. Given this, I also share Professor Shearing's conviction that the problems posed by the Anthropocene are of such a magnitude that all academic disciplines ought to do their bit to find solutions to these problems. After all it is impossible to know from where the best and most useful solutions will come.

Shearing is of course not the first criminologist to have realized that criminology might just have something important to say on these matters and there now exists the niche area of green criminology. In a nutshell (and I very much hope that green criminologists will forgive the ignorance of the non-criminologist here) green criminology is concerned with rethinking crime as constituting besides the ordinary human-on-human harm, also human against the environment crime. The environment is of course not easy to define and may include living as well as inert things (i.e. the well-established distinction between shallow and deep green ecology). However the environment is defined, it is clear that considering the environment in this way entails the move away from state-centric and legalistic notions of crime where only a comparatively small number of environmental crimes are (adequately) addressed (we may think of fly-tipping for example, which in many countries has heavy fines and even custodial sentences attached to it). Consequently taking green crime seriously has the potential to reshape the discipline of criminology as criminologists are asked to move away from positive municipal law of environmental crime towards what we might call a "natural law of environmental crime".

Shearing works within the subfield of green criminology at least in so far as he shares many of the assumptions of green criminologists. Above all else he believes in the possibility of 'people-on-green' crime, and also that our idea of crime and hence our understanding of criminology must change as a result of the onset of the age of the Anthropocene.

So far so good, for the purposes of this reply piece, however, one problem I had with Shearing's extensive mostly collaborative work with an environmental focus is that crime and criminology hardly appear to feature. Indeed most of his work appears to be on new environmental governance which:

[I]nvolves collaboration between a diversity of private, public and non-government stakeholders who, acting together towards commonly agreed (or mutually negotiated) goals hope to achieve far more collectively than individually. It relies heavily upon participatory dialogue and deliberation, devolved and decentralized decision-making, flexibility (rather than uniformity), inclusiveness, knowledge generation and processes of learning, transparency and institutionalized consensus-building practices (Gunningham et al., 2012: 4).

The clearest link to environmental crime I could find is that such 'polycentric' forms of governance have proved in practice a more powerful force of getting businesses to implement environmental legislation than traditional top-down governance. This is especially relevant in states that lack established top-down green governance and hence a decent green environmental record (e.g. South Africa); thus here more stakeholders lead to a greater awareness of the risk of prosecution (Peterson and Shearing, 2014: 13). In itself this is an example of how greater accountability can be achieved through NEG.

While crime does not feature much either in the lecture or in his work on environmental issues, Shearing does repeatedly talk in terms of security, indeed he wants to add to green criminology the idea of environmental security. Yet what is the connection between new environmental governance and environmental security? And what is the connection between crime and security? What indeed does Shearing mean by environmental security? It is necessary to pose these questions because it is here where a contradiction in Shearing's work - past and present - abounds. It seems that for Shearing governance, if done correctly, results in security, and indeed the building of an ecological infrastructure through NEG focuses 'on the poor communities to enhance their justice and security' (<http://www.publiclaw.uct.ac.za/staff/cshearing/>). Governance then produces security, and if

this is so then environmental security appears to be ‘a state of being’ that is achieved when harmony or a balance exists between human conduct (including their material consumption) and the natural ecology. So far so good, yet this contradicts his earlier work where he argues that security is not something that exists, merely something we can imagine (Woods and Shearing, 2007: 6), and where governance appears to be tantamount to practising security. In short it is not clear whether for Shearing environmental ‘security is a state of being’ or whether new environmental governance is a form of environmental ‘security practice’ (see Herington 2012, for these distinctions). In support of the latter, he cites Mariana Valverde who argues that security ‘is not something we can have more or less of, because it is not a thing at all’ (Valverde cited in Woods and Shearing, 2007: 6). Notably, in the lecture Shearing takes his cue for the understanding of the meaning of security from Valverde’s idea that ‘instead of focusing on security as a noun or a thing... [we should focus on] the very wide variety of *activities* and *practices* that are being carried out under the name of “security”’ (Valverde, 2014: 383-4).

It is important to understand that by pointing out this contradiction I do not wish to suggest that there is something inherently wrong with Valverde’s formulation. Her idea of ‘securitization’ (here as a short-hand for understanding security as a set of social and political practices) is simply substantially more constructivist than that of the Copenhagen school around Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde. The latter are the originators of both the securitization approach and sectors of security, including the idea of the environmental security sector. And while members of the school hold that the securitization approach is ‘constructivist all the way down’ (Buzan et al., 1998: 204) and ultimately what securitizing actors make of it, it is also the case that they as scholars set the criteria for when securitization is complete, which is the case only when exceptional means are employed to deal with a threat (ibid: 26). Yet if one is sympathetic to the idea that security is “what actors make of it”, then as Felix Ciută (2009) has pointed out it cannot be what scholars make of it.¹ Shearing and co. are particularly at risk of advancing simply their idea of what security is when they argue that ‘the governance of security’ is ‘actions designed to shape events so as to create spaces in which people can live, work and play’ (Wood and Shearing, 2007: 7). Surely, if this is so then there is hardly any political action outside of security action/securitization, because much political action pans out that way. While this allows us to see how collaboration in new environmental governance can then be considered a form of

¹ This being said it is entirely permissible for scholars to look at only one type of security practice, for example, one where security refers to the exception.

securitization (security practice), I disagree with calling a political action securitization unless – at a minimum – practitioners themselves follow a particular logic whereby the identification of a threat to some referent object, is followed by a change of behaviour by a relevant agent (i.e. the securitizing actor or someone instructed by the same) that is justified by the securitizing actor (and sometimes also by the executor of securitization) with reference to the declared threat.

Those criminologists, like Shearing, who would like to move away from crime and criminal justice as definitive of their subject and towards an understanding of criminology as a “security-ology”, are probably inclined to see me – especially as someone with a disciplinary background in security studies – as a gatekeeper on this subject. But nothing could be further from the truth, in my own work I have had to venture far away from security studies and International Relations to find answers to the questions that concern me the most – namely: When, if ever, *may* we lift an issue out of normal politics, and treat it as a security issue? What form *ought* security measures to ideally take? How *should* securitization ideally be reversed? – Questions that can only be answered with the help of practical ethics and moral philosophy. Whilst not gate-keeping, I nonetheless reject the idea of criminology as “security-ology” because thinking in terms of security is hardly ever all it is made out to be. Alas, the short history of what Richard A. Matthew and I have elsewhere called Environmental Security Studies (ESS) clearly shows that securitization does not tend to make for greater environmental security as a state of being, because every actor has a different view on who should be secured, from what and to what effect (Floyd and Matthew, 2013). Conventional security actors (i.e. the military and or a state’s national security establishment) are bound by their own narrow institutional agendas even as regards environmental security. Military actors, for example, tend not to think how they can enhance environmental security as human security, but rather about what environmental or climate insecurity mean in terms of their ability to provide national security. They may also think in terms of what strict environmental legislation means in terms of their ability ‘to train like they fight’ (cf. Floyd, 2010: 141). Of course, Professor Shearing envisages a move away from traditional notions of security formerly definitive of International Relations towards conceptions of human or ecological security, but even here one has to be careful. Thus politicians have been known to use the term environmental security and the language of securitization as a shield to hide behind, without taking suitable action on securing the environment or the climate. Especially if securitization does not require any concrete exceptional action then these politicians simply cannot be held accountable for not acting properly on a promise. These brief examples show

that there is a very strong case against advocating the securitization of the environment and climate, and I would advise against calling environmental collaboration of the kind Shearing and colleagues have studied ‘environmental security practice’.

None of this is to suggest, however, that environmental collaboration cannot lead to environmental security as a state of being. In ESS among the most fruitful approaches to actually achieving environmental security have been those approaches, that leave aside causality in, and probability of, the occurrence of violent environmental conflict and focus instead on the possibility of environmental peace-building or environmental peacemaking. The idea behind these approaches is that shared environmental grievances (usually in trans-boundary areas) can be solved through collaboration of key stake-holders, which in turn leads to trust building and greater overall security (Mass and Carius, 2013). Given this, it is very easy to conceive of NEG as a political approach towards achieving environmental security. Furthermore, I also do not wish to suggest for one moment that criminology does not have solutions to the problems definitive of the age of the Anthropocene. To the contrary, I happen to think that criminalization can often deal with these problems much better than securitization, or thinking in terms of security. With regards to biodiversity loss, for example, great advances have been made by criminalizing transnational environmental crime, including poaching, illegal logging, fishing and trade of animal parts. Even so, there remains a need for much greater and more systematic cooperation between countries and across legislative treaties (UNEP, 2012). The discipline of criminology could contribute considerable knowledge to how this could be achieved. Similarly there is a need for thinking systematically about what crime means when – in the absence of a new binding carbon emissions regime, but in the full knowledge of the root causes of climate change - states, businesses etc. intentionally neglect to curb carbon emissions. In short, my disagreement with Professor Shearing is not that I cannot see a place for criminology in trying to solve some of the problems of the Anthropocene, but only that I do not think it necessary to rethink criminology as “security-ology”, indeed I consider this potentially unhelpful to achieving environmental security as a state of being.

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